

Key Change

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by _Aubrey Minnick_

I was up before the old man could make his run, a desperate, perhaps fatal, sacrifice. I felt the bullet before I heard it, apprehension causing a delay as the sound traveled to my brain. The pain seared through my back; I couldn't tell exactly where I'd been hit, and just then it didn't really matter to me. I was still alive.

> Blackness threatened to overtake me as I groggily listened to the jumble of words from the corner. The old man remained seated. That was good. Someone, Jarod perhaps, argued in my behalf.

> I heard footfalls coming toward me and tried to turn myself over from where I had fallen, face down, but two strong, gentle hands steadied me and rolled me over to face their owner.

> "Jarod," I managed, as his form faded in and out.

> His hands didn't hesitate as they worked to apply pressure to my wound. "How do you know my name?"

> I smiled slightly. "Parallel universes. Perhaps even just in my mind. It's strange. I only know your first name, but I only know Miss Parker's last name."

> She appeared over Jarod's shoulder. "What's the kid talking about?"

> Jarod, for the first time I had ever seen, looked truly

perplexed. "I don't know."

> "He wouldn't," I added, "Since I don't know myself."

> "Crackpot," I heard Miss Parker mutter under her breath, her blue eyes solidifying in contempt.

> "I heard that," I whispered. It was growing harder and harder to speak. I drew the next breath sharply, sending me into a spasm of coughing. When I drew back the hand that had covered my mouth, I saw it was spotted with blood. "So that's where it hit me." The phrase came painfully, words slurred.

> I was fading again. More words came, this time from the men who held us hostage. A shuffle of feet, then someone gently lifted and carried me with the wave headed toward the vault.

> Is this what I came here for? To be shot, perhaps killed, thus ending my lifetime search for true life? Ironical it was that I might die before I even found it.

> Then came the feel of descent and I felt cold hard floor beneath me. The coolness made my mind retreat somewhere deep, leaving my conscious confused and unable to comprehend its surroundings. I shivered, from fear and from cold, staring at moving blurs threatening to descend on me.

There were too many of them; too close. My first thought as I opened my eyes was that everything was going to fall on me, and I would die. I whimpered, then gasped slightly as even that small effort brought stabs of pain. Vision clearing, I saw Jarod and remembered my whereabouts. The vault. The bank Then I realized my stupidity. I had acted to save a man's life, but had irreparably damaged the timeline. Would Jarod or Miss Parker ever discover what they needed to know? Had I perhaps barred the door to both their pasts? Concluding that I had to put things right, I steeled myself to speak.

> "Talk to Fenigore."

> "What was that?" asked Jarod, suddenly intent.

> "Fenigore," I wheezed. "He has the key."

> "What do you know about Fenigore?" Miss Parker appeared over Jarod's shoulder, having been able to get no information out of the old man.

> "He has the key," I repeated weakly.

> "We know that," Jarod said.

> "But how do *you* know?" challenged Parker.

> I reached into my hazy memory for an explanation. What had never made sense now left my mind reeling. "I . . . I don't know."

> "Tell me, you little--" here she cursed, and I squirmed, for the first time overcoming my physical pain with the insult.

> "Don't move," warned Jarod, but I tried to sit anyway, failing miserably.

> After a spasm of coughing, I confessed, exhausted and on the verge of tears, "All I wanted to do was help . . ." Here I lost focus, but sorted through the jumble of thoughts until I found one I could grab ahold of. "Fenigore . . ." And then I drifted off again.

Out of the swirl of blackness, I heard voices:

> "How is she?"

> "Did Fenigore say anything?"

> "She needs to go to the hospital."

> "Jarod, the old man won't say a word to me. Talk to him . .
."

> But I knew the old man didn't have a reason to speak, since I
had spared his health. How could I have been so foolish?

> ". . . The red files . . . "

> When I heard their mention, I wanted to leap for joy, but I
had no voice, no ability to move. Slightly panicked, I strained to
feel my limbs, to move my lips, but they felt numb, and a deeper
blackness engulfed me. Straining further against my numbness, my
breaths came more quickly. Relief swept over me as a ray of light
penetrated by blackened cage, but then I realized that it was not of
this earth . . .

I sat up in bed, sweating profusely, flailing my limbs wildly in
panic when I realized that I could move, was not dead. Across, the
room, the TV glowed with late night infomercials, several hours after
the "Pretender" episode still so vivid in my mind. Carefully, testing
every movement, I got up and turned off the TV. Creeping back to bed,
I turned on my lamp and opened my dream journal. This was one for the
books.

End
file.